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ID 903. Forgotten Heroes, Remembering Our Industrial Legacy and Reconstructing Marginalized Regions: The Continuing Relevance of the Oaks Colliery Disaster of 1866

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Forgotten Heroes, Remembering Our Industrial Legacy and Reconstructing Marginalized Regions: The Continuing Relevance of the Oaks Colliery Disaster of 1866

On December 12/13, 1866, 361 men and boys were killed in an explosion at the Oaks Colliery in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK. Despite being the world's worst industrial loss of life in the 19th century, it remained relatively unremembered until 2015, when a group of ex-miners, trade unionists, and local historians attempted to raise money to erect a memorial for its 150th anniversary. But first, they had to find out what happened, and to whom, and whether anybody cared. The film *Black Snow* is a 23 minute documentary that tells three interlocking stories: the story of a historical community devastated by the disaster, struggling to survive; the story of a contemporary community, decimated by the loss of industry, rediscovering itself in the struggle to remember; and the story of a sculptor, struggling to make one last masterpiece. The film offers an emotional narrative that seeks to explore history as a living phenomenon in the present. Local ex-miners and their families voice historical characters, share their stories, guide us both above and below ground, and even recreate the disaster itself through Virtual Reality. Following Wood et al,(2018) the film itself constitutes the “paper”, and will be used as a basis for questions.

Word Count: 4033

Forgotten Heroes, Remembering Our Industrial Legacy and Reconstructing Marginalized Regions: The Continuing Relevance of the Oaks Colliery Disaster of 1866

Introduction:

This “paper” is not a paper in the traditional sense of the word, but is submitted in a paper form in order to enable the questioning of what counts as an acceptable form of presentation of academic research. This is not untrodden ground, but almost – whether a film can itself count as a research output was raised by Reisz (2017) and Wood et al (2018) put out a manifesto for film as research and Linstead (2017) outlined some compositional principles for film as a “critically affective performative text.” Indeed, Wood was successful in gaining a best paper award from the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management for a film submission in December 2017, so the argument is winning important support.

The “paper” that this commentary supports is an output funded by a grant from the UK Heritage Lottery Fund OH-15-6509 in partnership with the charity *People and Mining* and the National Union of Mineworkers, the purpose of which was to support a broader commemorative and educational initiative by making a short historical documentary. On December 12/13, 1866, 361 men and boys were killed in an explosion at the Oaks Colliery in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK. Despite being the world's worst industrial loss of life in the 19th century, it remained relatively unremembered until 2015, when a group of ex-miners, trade unionists, and local historians attempted to raise money to erect a memorial for its 150th anniversary. Included in the grant was provision for doctoral-level intern to advise on the diverse range of historical resources the film needed to draw on, including contested accounts of the numbers of dead involved, and the exact cause of the initial explosion. What emerged was a contradictory set of accounts with no definitive version of events – the two official reports laid on Parliament on May 7 1867 largely concurred but favoured different causes, and although Parliament accepted the number of dead as being 361, there was no definitive list of names, and none of the lists that existed documented that total (and those that existed were fraught with error). Remembering the disaster was therefore challenged by a degree of uncertainty as to what exactly was being remembered. This was a practical issue for the memorial, as the volunteers and donors wanted to see a definitive list of names “carved in stone”. But first, they had to find out what happened, and to whom, and whether anybody cared. Access was enabled to a range of sources held in local libraries, private collections and the NUM archive, many of which had not been consulted, and a number of these were made available to the public for the first time as we digitised them in the process of carrying out our research. The film *Black Snow* emerged from a process that was both organic and disciplined, artistic and technological, narratively both creative and precise, as a 23 minute documentary that tells three interlocking stories: the story of a historical community devastated by the disaster, struggling to survive; the story of a contemporary community, decimated by the loss of industry, rediscovering itself in the struggle to remember; and the story of a sculptor, struggling to make one last masterpiece, finding that he was also caught up in the historical narrative. The film offers an emotional narrative that seeks to explore history as a living phenomenon in the present and gives an account of an extraordinary achievement by ordinary people. Local ex-miners and their families were used to voice historical characters, share their stories, guide us both above and below ground. and even recreate the disaster itself through Virtual Reality footage. Following Wood et al,(2018) the film itself constitutes the “paper”, and will be used as a basis for questions as it raises issues of historical accuracy, affective integrity, representational verisimilitude and the idea of “living history” and legacy as a driver for contemporary change and reconstruction. The film is IMDb listed and currently in international festival competition. It won *Best Film* for October 2017 in the *Hollywood International Independent Documentary Awards*, *Best Film on Industrial Archaeology* from the *Social Machinery Film Festival* (Italy/Canada), *Best Short Documentary* from the *Move Me Film Festival* (Belgium), *3rd Place Best Film* at the *12 Months Film*

Festival, Best Short Documentary at the Southern Arts Film Festival (Chile); Awards of Merit from Best Shorts Awards and Impact Docs Awards (USA); an Award of Distinction from Canada Shorts Awards; a Platinum Award from the International Independent Documentary Awards (USA); a Silver Award from Spotlight Documentary Awards (USA); an Honourable Mention from the International Shorts Awards and was an Award Finalist at the BAFTA nominating Carmarthen Bay Film Festival. It gained Official Selections for Screening in the International Labour Film Competition at the London Labour Film Festival, the Las Cruces Film Festival (USA); the Medellin International Film Festival (Colombia); Official Selection and Screened Nominee for the Feel the Reel International Film Festival (Scotland); Official Selection in The Monthly Film Festival November 2017; Nominations for the Beveren International Short Film Festival, and the Moving Pictures Festival (Belgium); Official Selections for the Roma Cinema Doc Film Festival, Golden Knight Festival (Malta), UK Monthly Film Festival, Bucharest ShortCut Film Festival, and a Longlisting for the Winchester Short Film Festival. The film has non-exclusive worldwide broadcast TV distribution through The Community Channel and had its broadcast TV Premiere in May 2018 on Together TV. It has featured in The Times <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/black-snow-marks-devastating-blast-at-barnsley-colliery-ks6c03jlf> on the BBC website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-41187124> (inc. VR footage) and in Living North (Jan/Feb 2018). It has also been booked for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. A teaser can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/195121587>; and the film is available for purchase at <https://bellebeteproductions.vhx.tv/>

The script of the film follows to give an idea of content to support the teaser.

Black Snow: Script

(Opening shot over Houses of Parliament... voices in hubbub)

Dan Jarvis MP: [00:00:04] Today marks precisely 150 years since an explosion at the Oaks Colliery killed 383 Barnsley miners. A number of the victims were under 14 and the youngest were just 10 years old. Mr. Speaker can I therefore seek your guidance on how best to ensure that this house commemorates the service and sacrifice of all those who lost their lives at the Oaks colliery disaster a hundred and fifty years ago today [Hear Hear].

Voices: [00:00:31] Hear, Hear

John Bercow MP: [00:00:33] Well my answer to the honourable gentleman is as follows.. [fade out].

Song - "Guard yer Man Weel": [00:01:05]

Guard yer man weel through the night
Love him till dawn's early light
All come the long day he'll be far away
Deep down in the rock far from sight.

Anne Munro (Kitty): [00:01:25] It were a black day that Wednesday. Bitter cold. Snow dusting t' ground. It'd been bitter for days and though we didn't want a hard winter - god knows - it meant plenty of work for t'men - men who went down that cursed 'oyle to keep country warm and two weeks before Christmas they all wanted all t'work they could get and they all went down - for t'bairns, for Christmas.

Stephen Miller: [00:01:54] If you look at the history of the Oaks, nineteen years before the '66 disaster there was another large one that killed over 70 and then right in those 20 years there were reports again and again coming up of men refusing to work because it was too gassy it was too

dangerous. I wasn't really thinking about numbers and it was something the volunteers always emphasized that they weren't interested in what the final number was really. up to that point. These had just been names on a sheet. So we wanted to kind of bring those people the dignity they deserve after all this time.

Paul Hardman: [00:02:25] It's a disaster that has been forgotten in time. The disaster that happened in 1866 at the Oaks Colliery has never had a proper monument to it. It's almost as if it wanted to be forgotten.

Chris Skidmore: [00:02:38] It *is* the worst disaster and not a lot of people know about it. It sort of came from a conversation between me and Paul Hardman really how it started off and just through talking between ourselves and then meeting people in a group- called *People in Mining* - who were all ex-miners so it was like a big family coming together and banging some ideas about and then asking Graham if he could come up with a design.

Graham Ibbeson: [00:03:06] So basically we see the woman walking forward over a kind of rural landscape with coal cascading down her back. And obviously her husband digging his own grave underneath.

Chris Skidmore: [00:03:30] We decided to ask the *People in Mining* if they were interested in taking this project forward.

Barry Moore: [00:03:36] We gave them ideas of what we wanted to do. And they also gave us their ideas and this is how it's worked together. Now people's ideas come together and if one of you got a better idea we're always willing to listen you know. And this is the magic of *People in Mining*.

Graham Ibbeson: [00:03:50] And so I suggested an 'Alo - it's not really an 'alo but I see it as an 'alo - but it also represents the pithead winding wheel, as well as the circle of life because this community... she's... even though she's moving towards the colliery she is moving forward into another life.

Peter Davies: [00:04:12] The Oaks Colliery is England's worst mining disaster and there has never been a national memorial to that disaster. Wales and Scotland have their national memorials so we hope that this will be a national memorial for England.

Barry Moore: [00:04:26] There's been so many little accidents and disasters at pits where three or four men have been killed and they don't get the recognition. So we want it to be national - we want this for everybody. People say these people have been nearly forgotten about -do something about it and that's where we get our confidence and strength from people saying - Do it- do it while you've got chance.

Andy Munro Miner 1: [00:04:45] T'owners were never forward about safety - coal were good, demand were great, people were sacrificed - 73 souls at Oaks in 1847; Darley Main 75 in 1849; 52 at Warren Vale in 1851; 6 at Lundhill in 1854 followed by a further 189 in 1857; 59 at Edmond's Main 1862 533 lives in 25 years. Barnsley were't mining disaster capital of England and too few people were ashamed of that. Mr Martin the Queen's Inspector himself said owners armed themselves wi' clever lawyers and tampered with witnesses and they kept getting away with it and avoiding blame.

Steve Wyatt: [00:05:39] The traditional lamp of 1866 would be carried by all personnel at the colliery. That would be workmen, trammers, and also viewers officials and under officials. Workmen would work with this type pick a traditional pick. It is very thin and narrow. And the reason of that is

because it was used to undercut coal. And it was easier for the collier to swing when he was laid on his side. the Colliers would wear flat caps. This is traditional leather Miner's jockey hat. It's called a jockey hat because it looks like a jockey's hat. But they used to wear them... [reverses hat] That way. So an official would have an oil lamp in his hand, and a stick. He would not carry a pick because he didn't hew coal.

[Mine descent]

Victoria Munro Kitty's Friend: [00:06:45] I was born in 1838 same year that 26 bairns drowned when't Huskar pit up Silkstone flooded. Should have been playing in t'sunshine not being underground, children o't' dark. It were like a curse to punish us. But we knew who were to blame. Lord Ashton tried to change things but t'owners bullied parliament to pull report's teeth. 1842 Act would've saved only 10 kids that terrible day. There were only one inspector to enforce it at time so it was worth t'owners while to ignore it. There were always families desperate for money, and every day busier, busier, the risk increased and the women and children left weeping and starving.

Paul Hardman: [00:07:38] The main gas that causes explosion is methane and the methane is trapped in the carbon because it cannot escape anywhere. Pockets of methane will be contained even in minute fissures of the coal.

Paul Darlow: [00:07:56] Inside there's gas - so a problem one of the problems that you get from mining coal is gas - methane gas. So they've got to ventilate. When you're digging this out of the ground it's got in little fissures - all -gas escapes all the time. And if you're in a confined place like a coal mine it'd be like being in the barrel of a gun.

Paul Hardman: [00:08:20] Fire damp is methane but they know it as fire damp because if you lit it in the correct mixture with oxygen it would explode. When the gas explodes it produces other gases. And the first one that you would probably encounter would be the after damp which is a mixture of gases, but the main one is the carbon monoxide which will kill you pretty rapidly. Once the fires explode and start to burn all the oxygen out you're left with carbon dioxide and if you're in excessive measures of that you will choke, you will asphyxiate and die.

Paul Darlow: [00:09:01] This is a face similar to the one that had been mined in the Oaks. It's called the board and pillar method in mining, where they left a pillar of coal to hold the roof up. Later development saw them using a system called the longwall method of mining - still similar to the board and pillar but wooden props hold the roof up. The problem with long wall mining is there were more gas but the benefits were a lot more coal.

Andy Munro Miner 1: [00:09:34] They put in a new furnace in 1858 to improve ventilation but former viewer John Brown said no amount of ventilation will prevent an explosion with the amount of gas that had leaked in't past at t'Oaks.

Tony Banks: [00:10:05] During the disaster in 1866 there were over 40 ponies died. Forty ponies died due to the disaster ... the explosion. Now I worked with ponies from 1957 and we had at least 40 at the Manor at the time. And they are amazing animals to work with absolutely fantastic. Better than working with men, believe it or not.

Tony Banks: [00:10:34] William Henry Hart, a young lad, was working with a donkey and they called it Tom. He were sat in a niche in the pit bottom area with his legs underneath the donkey and the donkey took the full force of the blast, enabling William Henry Hart to survive.

Anne Munro Kitty: [00:10:49] I were at home wi't'youngest o' my eight bairns when t'Oaks

exploded. It blasted coal from deep in t'belly o't'earth up to 't sky, turning clouds ghastly grey and dropping its terrible death-laden soot on 't farmers in Cudworth as they stood terrified in their frozen fields, as far as five miles away they said. Black snow. Strange, silky soft, bloody- a touch of hell to make thee tremble - a black hearted, a deathly day.

Graham Ibbeson: [00:11:21] I've got mining history going back 180 years plus in this area. So this is a sculpture I was born to make. The poignant thing is when I was going through the records I found that Ibbeson was on the list of fatalities of the Oaks 150 years ago. And I worked it back ... my great great granddad Joe Ibbeson had a brother called George who actually died in this colliery, in this horrible disaster. So I've got an affinity with it. I didn't even know that before this started. We've got an Oaks print of a woman walking with a child - just a back view of her with the child on this - on her right hip, walking towards the colliery. It's exactly the same woman that I modelled. Now that's a bit of a coincidence I think. You know - I mean the hairs on the back of my neck start tingling when I realize that coincidence. And that I was born to make this happen.

Anne Munro Kitty: [00:12:36] That's me. Stricken. My man, my man. What's to do? All I could think was run, lass, grab t'squawking bairn and run to t' pit top, throw thissen on t'Lord's mercy, though he's shown little on it in my life.

Anne Munro (Kitty): [00:12:47] This valley, and this seam has took hundreds of lives, and more today. But please, not mine... I come to this shattered hole, shivering with cold and fear a babe at me breast, smoke and flames searin' t' sky. And my Tom! Is he in heaven or hell? Or is he a broken twisted half-melted man that'll never walk on his own again?. Oh God, oh God! if there's a smile in that black face, smile it nah.

Victoria Munro (Kitty's Friend): [00:13:40] When't pit went up it were like a volcano it shook all't houses for miles around. All't houses emptied and we ran wives, mothers. babies in arms toddlers dragged heedless of obstructions to t'pit top with smoke flames and charred wood rising, cages blown away... Some poor wretch were brought up body burned black his hair singed off his head, body blistered, hands and arms skinned. His cries when t'cold air reached his skin when his wrapper fell off were excruciating beyond conception. And I saw me friend Kitty...when she heard his voice - her horror, her agony, screaming "Oh me Poor lad. Me Poor dear Tommy. Oh dear!".

Andy Munro Miner 1: [00:14:30] All t'same, engineers and managers were brave enough when t' disaster we feared happened and took a full part in t'rescue activities. Mr Dymond were one o't first down. But then he wouldn't speak to t'inquest. Mr. Tewart, Mr. Siddons and Mr. Sugden were all killed in t'second explosion. Mr Jeffcock who worked furiously all night substituting for Mr. Woodhouse were identified only by t'collar on his shirt, he was so mutilated. Mr Smith who left t'Oaks for Lundhill and returned to help were recognizable only by his fob watch.

Stephen Miller: [00:15:03] By my workings the shafts are either side of the little tree in the centre of the carpark and the shafts are very close together which you can see on all the plans and maps. If we'd been stood here 150 years ago on the 12th of December, you'd have felt the explosion was heard over a mile away and they talked about potential damage being caused to Christ Church in Ardsley Above ground. So you know the extent of the explosion was huge and the second one actually - the one that killed the volunteer rescuers - was even bigger. That was the one that fired all three shafts - the smoke billowed and could be seen for miles and miles coming from here. t'pit was on fire at that point, so every new pocket of gas was going up. The second was the biggest of all the explosions. It was described in a Victorian paper as a vast Golgotha.

Stephen Linstead (Miner 2): [00:15:54] Pit Were on fire. Nobody could have survived. So we got ready to cap it. Then a miracle happened. At four in't morning on Friday signal bell on number two

shaft rang. We sent dahn a bottle of brandy and tea on a rope. When it come up empty we rigged up a makeshift winding gear and a kibble. Mr Mammatt and young Tom Embleton went dahn. It were a perilous descent because with no pumps workin water just cascaded on them. At the bottom they found Samuel Brown terrified, soaked and freezing. He crawled over the corpses of his friends to get there and to keep his spirits up he sang *Abide with me*.

Brian Elliott: [00:16:40] When the Oaks exploded there was nothing to compare[with] it. It was at least twice the size of Lundhill, for example. there'd just been nothing else like it in in British in World mining history. It was so extraordinary and the impact was enormous on the communities. virtually the entire adult male population of part of ...several streets in Hoyle Mill were eliminated. In an afternoon.

Bob Chiswick (Rev Crompton): [00:17:17] Indeed I spoke in outburst against my fellow cleric Reverend Day who expressed sympathy with the proprietors of the Oaks Colliery for their crushing sorrow at the terrible loss of lives and the bereavement of their relatives, admiring the able Mr Dymond whose agonies of spirit, he said, were greater than his loss of property. As a man of God I have strong sympathy with the masters as *men*, but the most painful regret they should have must surely be that the same masters, as *mine managers* and *engineers*, failed to sink adequate shafts for ventilation to lessen the danger. If two other shafts had been sunk this calamity might never have happened, and they were not sunk for reasons of expense. But what price is there laid on 360 souls, many without a grave, and their hellish deaths?. The noble Earl Fitzwilliam brushed aside my “controversy” and not one single soul in that chilling room supported me.

Brian Elliott: [00:18:23] I would commend people that have done research recently and acknowledge what they've done but I've yet to see the historical evidence to absolutely back this research up. I've gone back to my original work and I've looked at resources again in the NUM archives. My conclusion tends to be once again in support of the 361 figure. Until I see absolutely definite evidence of these extra 20 or 22 I think we've got to go back to the original 361 figure that's in the official report. Otherwise what you're doing is rewriting history.

Graham Ibbeson: [00:19:20] This is about my community, the community that I was born in. I'm part of this community as well. This sculpture were made just down the road - she's a Barnsley lass. I wanted to focus ...rather than on the coal industry.. I wanted to focus specifically on the community. To me she represents the community moving forward over 150 years [00:19:42] ... and in a way the [2.6] biggest monument or memorial to the disaster is the community that's around in 2016. It's been funded by the majority of the community it's. It's been made within that community and it's going to be placed in that community. it's the end gam,e of my sculpture career.... it won't get any better than this. [00:20:10] I said what... (stifles tears) [0.8]

Graham Ibbeson: [00:20:17][emotional].. Sorry... I'm a son of a Barnsley miner. Great Grandson as well. So it's about me, as well as the community moving forward. I'm emotionally involved in it and I think I've laid all my emotions bare within it and I certainly think it's the best sculpture I've made to date. And if I can finish on that, that's what I want to do.

Chris Skidmore: [00:20:45] This is where your history comes from. This is what your.. this is what mining was about: it wasn't just about making profits, it wasn't just about having a laugh, it wasn't just about getting coal out o't ground. This is what your heritage is about.

Andy Munro: [00:20:59] We sometimes come across some bones - we did the other day and we sent them up to the top. But nobody claimed them. And they were buried. There was only a skull and a piece of legbone.

Graham Ibbeson: [00:22:10] Ah told yer ah'd get emotional.

(Closing shot rising over crosses fade to credits – Black Snow Lament playing)

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